Manage Your Media

A Slew Of Players For Your Review

MP3, Ogg Vorbis, DivX, AVI. They're everywhere. On the Web. On your PC. Our computers are teeming with huge files with strange names that deliver to us the audio and video content we want. Of course, you need software to manage these media files.

We've rounded up a dozen applications for Windows, Mac OS, and Linux that can help you play, organize, and create digital media files. Try out a few and you'll be a media magnate in no time. To test our media players, we used a 700MHz PIII system with 640MB of RAM running WinXP. Our reviews are broken into two sections: Audio Players, for those apps that specialize in this area, and Audio & Video Players.

AUDIO PLAYERS

MusicMatch Jukebox 7.5

When we looked at MusicMatch Jukebox 7.0 for the March 2002 issue of *CPU*, it was barely tolerable. Version 7.5 is vastly improved. If you've tried it before and didn't like it, the program is worth another look.

The free, Basic version can play media, rip, and burn CDs, although ripping and burning is slow and throttled back a bit too much. The Plus version ups the ante with faster MP3 ripping and CD burning, an ability to print customized CD labels and covers, and additional features for organizing your music collection. The well-developed burning tool lets you create audio DVDs and multisession CDs and save and restore burning projects.

The program also serves up copious information about the media you're imbibing. For example, for MP3s and audio CDs you'll see a track listing, reviews, cover art, and album credits in the program's integrated Web browser. If that's too much information, roll up the browser for a more svelte interface.

MusicMatch Jukebox 7.5
Basic, free; Plus, $19.99
MusicMatch
www.musicmatch.com
Platform: Windows

Jukebox includes access to streaming Internet radio stations that are more customizable than most. You can create stations that play your favorite artists and get personalized music recommendations. The best features and content are reserved for subscribers to MusicMatch's Radio MX service, which costs an additional $4.95 per month (less if you commit to a three- or 12-month subscription).

Sonique 1.96

As the name implies, Sonique is dedicated to audio. It plays MPEG, WAV, audio CDs, Windows Media Audio files, and SHOUTcast and Icecast streams. Sonique's support for OGG files is iffy; files created with more recent versions of the protocol didn't work.

The program is blessed with a fun interface, featuring colorful buttons and labels that flow around the window when clicked. Features include a graphics equalizer, ID3 tag editor, skinnable interface, and plug-in support. The program doesn't directly support CD databases, such as CDDB and freedb, but a third-party plug-in adds support for them. Another plug-in adds support for video files.

Sonique includes a music search tool, but it's a disappointment. It simply sends your query to the Lycos and HotBot search engines, which typically lead to less-than-satisfying results. The program is free, but be prepared to endure a laborious registration process before downloading it. Version 2.0, now in alpha testing and without a firm release date, promises an improved user interface and customization options. If the search capability and support for Ogg Vorbis are improved, Version 2 could be a contender.

Sonique 1.96
Free
Sonique
sonique.lycos.com
Platform: Windows

Visual MP3 4.2

Although it has kind of a Windows 3.1-esque interface, Visual MP3 is a pleasant MP3 player and ripper that offers some unique features. It includes an unusual Karaoke mode that displays lyrics as a song plays; you can bind

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect

lyrics to music files yourself or download ready-made lyric files. The app's playlists are also compatible with Winamp's, which is a nice touch.

Visual MP3 4.2
$29.95 after 30-day trial
iProgram Development
www.iprogramdev.com
Platform: Windows

Visual MP3 offers good tools for organizing your music collection, including fast search and sort functions. The renaming tool will quickly give music files better file names based on their ID3 tags. Version 4.2 adds the ability to edit ID3 tags and query and submit data to the freedb database.

Do you feel compelled to brag about your killer MP3 collection on the Web? Then use the program's HTML List function, which exports your list of music as an HTML file, sorted by artist, title, or album.

If your digital music collection is limited to MP3s and OGG files, Visual MP3 is a competent player spiced up with thoughtful extras. We just wish the interface were a little less funky. Thankfully, registration includes free upgrades for life, so you won't have to pay again for a future version with a more polished look.

Winamp 3

Winamp is a free, fun media player that specializes in MP3s, CDs, and SHOUTcast streams. Version 3 adds support for video but is limited to a proprietary video format that isn't widely supported. So forget the video and stick with what Winamp does best: audio.

The program is available in Lite, Standard, and Full versions, which offer varying degrees of features and girth. (Only the Full version, weighing in at 3.2MB, was available at press time.) All versions include the basics: the ability to play MP3s, Ogg Vorbis, and SHOUTcast streams. (SHOUTcast, Nullsoft's free streaming audio system, is one of the most comprehensive directories of streaming radio stations.) The standard version adds visualizations, and the full version adds support for WMA files, too.

Winamp 3
Free
Nullsoft
www.winamp.com
Platform: Windows; Mac OS Classic
alpha version

Winamp's interface is sleek and efficient. It doesn't waste screen real estate; it compresses a graphic equalizer, playlist editor, media library, mini Web browser, and visualizations into a surprisingly small space. The app also makes it easy to hide any features you don't need. The program supports skins (of which a ton are available for download), or you can just stuff it in the System Tray for a no-interface interface.

If you just want a reliable, cheap program for listening to digital music with crossfading and other sound controls without a lot of other baggage, Winamp is a great choice.

AUDIO & VIDEO PLAYERS

Media JukeBox 8.0

If there's only room in your life (or your hard drive) for one media player, Media JukeBox just might be the one. It can play virtually every type of audio and video media, including RealMedia, QuickTime, Audible, Windows Media, Liquid Audio, DVDs, and even video from a TV tuner card. In addition to playing, it can rip audio CDs; encode in MP3, OGG, WMA, and other formats; and burn your media creations to disc.

Version 8 adds support for plug-ins and for online CD and DVD databases. The Plus version adds a media library; faster CD burning (the free version is limited to painfully slow 2X); an editor for trimming, splitting, and modifying sound files; and the ability to print CD labels and jewel case inserts. The DSP Studio feature provides a 10-band equalizer, environmental effects, and simulated surround sound.

A cool Media Scheduler lets you automate virtually any function, from setting an alarm to playing an MP3 at quitting time to recording your favorite show with your TV tuner card. The standard interface works well, but you can opt for something a little more flashy with a skinnable mini mode.

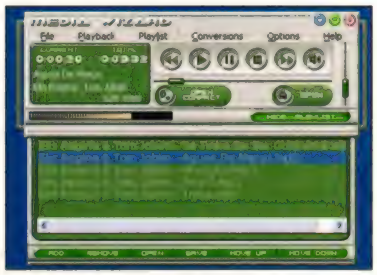
Media JukeBox 8.0
Basic, free; Plus, $24.98
J. River
www.musicex.com/mediajukebox
Platform: Windows

Media Wizard 7.1

Media Wizard is a capable little audio player, encoder, and editor that works with MP3, WMA, Ogg Vorbis, audio CDs, and many other common file formats. Although the program is supposed to handle AVI and MPEG video, too, it hung when I tried to watch video files, so stick with audio.

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect

The application includes plenty of editing and audio-conversion tools. You can covert media between MP3, OGG, WMA, WAV, and audio CD formats. Then you can use the editor to crop, fade, append, and add audio effects, such as echo. The editor can also import audio from a microphone or line-in sources, so you can convert your old Tom Jones LPs to digital format.



Media Wizard 7.1
$50 after 15-day trial
CDH Productions
www.cdhnow.com
Platform: Windows

All in all, Media Wizard is a good player for audio with CDDB support, an MP3 tag editor, good playlist management, and other niceties. But the $50 price tag seems a bit too high given the fact that we couldn't get it to show videos.

MoviX 0.6.0

Here's a unique angle on the player scene: MoviX is a media player that's actually a small Linux distribution. Install it on a CD-R along with your media files, and it contains all the software necessary to boot from the CD and play your media. It's a cool way to create a portable video show that will play on practically any PC, regardless of what software or operating system is installed. MoviX supports DivX, AVI, MPEG, MP3, Ogg Vorbis, and other formats.

To create a MoviX disc, you need a CD-R burner and burning software. Open the MoviX ISO file in your burner software, then add the video and audio files to the disc's root directory. Burn the disc. Now boot any PC with that disc for an instant movie on the go.

MoviX 0.6.0
Free
Roberto De Leo
movix.sourceforge.net
Platform: Linux

An offshoot of the project, MoviX2, has a different philosophy: It's a standalone player that lets you switch discs after booting, so you can play any DVD, VCD, or audio CD without special preparation.

QuickTime Player 6

For Mac users, QuickTime is practically a necessity, which is fine because it comes preinstalled with Mac OS. For Windows users, it's a useful player to have around to view all sorts of media.

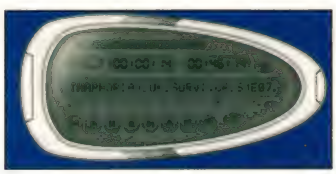
QuickTime Player 6
Basic, free; Pro, $29.99
Apple
www.apple.com/quicktime
Platform: Windows, Mac OS

The free QuickTime Player can choke down a massive variety of video and audio file formats, from MP3s to 360-degree-view virtual reality images. The newest version's claim to fame is that it supports MPEG-4, a standard for delivering high-quality video and audio streams. If QuickTime doesn't support a given format, chances are good that you can add support with the help of a plug-in. For instance, you can add MPEG-2 support with the $19.99 MPEG-2 Playback Component.

The $29.99 Pro version adds the ability to play movies in full-screen mode, download and save movies from Web sites, and import and export media in a variety of formats. It also offers basic authoring tools, including the ability to create MPEG-4 content, edit movies, and build video slideshows. It's not a replacement for a full-featured video-editing suite, but it's good enough for editing home movies or converting peer-to-peer movie downloads to CD-V format.

RadLight Special Edition 3.03

RadLight is a video player that's supposed to handle DivX, AVI, RealMedia, and other formats. The program is a monstrosity. First, it wouldn't play some of the perfectly valid files we tried it with. Later, it refused to open any files at all. An unstoppable flood of error messages in German followed this, then a system crash. As a bonus, the app installs adware on your PC.



RadLight Special Edition 3.03
Free; $20 to remove ads
RadLight
www.radlight.net

RealOne Player

RealOne Player supports more than 50 media types, but its specialty is streaming audio and video codecs. The Basic player is a free, capable program that plays many media types, rips MP3s, and burns CDs. For full functionality, upgrade to the $29.95 Plus version or subscribe to SuperPass, a $9.95 per month service that includes the plus features and access to an

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impressive library of premium streaming media content.

The Plus version adds the ability to play Windows Media and QuickTime MPEG-4 media, do variable bit-rate MP3 encoding, use a 10-band graphic equalizer, crossfade between audio tracks, record from analog sources, print jewel case inserts, and more. The free version isn't so crippled as to be unusable. With it, you can do high-quality MP3 encoding and full-speed CD burning and have access to thousands of online radio stations.

Version 2 of RealOne Player overcomes many of the problems that stymied the first version. It's faster and less expensive, but the multiple-pane interface with an integrated Web browser can be cluttered. Good thing there's a nice full-screen theater mode.

RealOne Player
Basic, free; Plus, $29.95
Real
www.real.com
Platform: Windows, Mac OS X

Threefifteen Jukebox 2.42

Threefifteen Jukebox is an unremarkable player and ripper that supports MP3, Windows media, audio CDs, and a few other common audio formats, but not Ogg Vorbis. The program, built on a Microsoft Access database, is meant to manage a large digital audio library. The makers claim it can handle more than 20,000 files.

Threefifteen's interface, which resembles a vintage jukebox, is either quaint or gaudy. (After all, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.) Whether or not you appreciate the look of the jukebox, the program's interface is its biggest liability.

Threefifteen Jukebox 2.42
$29.95 after 15-day trial
Open G
www.openg.com
Platform: Windows

The interface is clumsy and just nonintuitive enough to make you crazy. For instance, you have to press the Record button to simply listen to a CD or look at its tracks. Worse, the program inexplicably couldn't play any of the CDs I inserted (indicating they might be dirty or scratched, although the same discs worked fine with other programs) and finally spewed an endless loop of error windows. At least the Wurlitzer at the local coffee shop doesn't do that.

Windows Media Player 9

The newest version of Windows Media Player, in final beta testing when I tried it, is a worthy tool that supports just about any media format you can throw at it, including Video CD.

At first glance, Windows Media Player 9 looks a lot like Version 8, which shipped with WinXP. Behind the scenes, the new version adds several codecs, many of which aren't yet available in other media players. There are protocols for better-compressed and higher-quality video and audio streams, a new codec that supports 5.1-channel surround sound, and a lossless, compressed audio format aimed at audiophiles.

There are also interface improvements in the program. A mini-player mode moves controls to the Taskbar for less clutter. The Info Center serves up details about the CD, MP3, DVD, or stream you're taking in, including artist bios, lyrics, discographies, and album covers. Other new features include variable speed playback, which can speed up audio without making it sound like it was recorded by Alvin and the Chipmunks.

The excellent Windows version is light-years ahead of the Mac versions. The version for Mac OS Classic is a crash-prone atrocity, and the OS X version hasn't been updated to include version 9's new features.

Windows Media Player 9
Free
Microsoft
www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia
Platform: Windows, Mac OS Classic and X, Solaris

Manage Your Media

For good, old-fashioned enjoyment of MP3s and Ogg Vorbis tunes, my pick is Winamp. If you want to rip and burn music, too, take RealOne Player and Media Jukebox for test-drives to see which you prefer. For video, stock your arsenal with either QuickTime Player 6 or Windows Media Player 9. You should now be ready to handle the teeming masses of digital media files that await you. ▲

by Kevin Savetz

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